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SUBJECT: CITIZENS NOT SUBJECTS: OPPOSITION PARTY TIRED OF
PLAYING GAMES

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Leaders from the opposition at-Tajdid party opined that Tunisia is ready for, and needs, more freedom of expression during an October 6 meeting with the Ambassador. The party opposed the ruling party's presidential candidacy requirements proposal, and has not yet decided whether to contest the 2009 Presidential elections. Their goal is for the government to hold authentic elections. Party First Secretary Ahmed Brahim criticized the government's handling of worker protests in the southwest. He was prevented from meeting with the family of arrestees by police. He spoke favorably of the Secretary's support for reform after her recent visit here. End Summary.

Stuck Between Extremes

¶2. (C) In the spectrum of Tunisian political parties, at-Tajdid (until 1993 the Tunisian Communist Party) falls somewhere in the middle. Unlike some of the more sycophantic opposition parties, at-Tajdid First Secretary Ahmed Brahim highlighted the party's opposition to a number of government policies, especially those concerning freedom of association and freedom of expression. At-Tajdid's relationship with the government, however, is strong enough that it was allowed to win three seats in parliament and the 200,000 TD (US \$166,666) in funding that comes with them. During the Ambassador's October 6 meeting with Brahim, parliamentarian Adel Chaouch, and political bureau member Abdelaziz El Messaoudi, Brahim remarked that there are several government policies that at-Tajdid agrees with such as the GOT support of women's rights and a secular approach to politics. He also pointed out that he disagrees with the opposition Progressive Democratic Party's efforts to reach out to moderate Islamists, opining that "some" opposition parties seem to disagree with the GOT for disagreement's sake.

Tunisia Is Not A Monarchy,
At Least Not Technically

¶3. (C) Brahim expressed the view that there were unsettling shades of feudalism in the pleas from the impoverished southwestern mining regions to President Ben Ali calling for his intervention, aid, and assistance. Brahim, Chaouch, and El Messaoudi concurred that a national dialogue on unemployment is necessary. Despite GOT rhetoric, they continued, the RCD has no tolerance for the dissent or divergence of thought that a debate would entail. The

"worst" part, according to Brahim, is that the RCD would probably win free and fair elections anyway, thus there really is no need for the widespread suppression of freedom of expression designed to protect the RCD's control.

¶4. (C) Despite having seats in parliament, Brahim noted that at-Tajdid has encountered some of the same problems as the more outspoken opposition parties, such as an inability to find regional office space. Although at-Tajdid has finally succeeded in establishing an office in Gafsa, in many other towns where the party found office space the landlord suddenly backed out apparently due to government pressure. During his visit, Brahim sought to meet with the families of people who had been arrested in the Gafsa/Redeyef protests. He remarked that police prevented the visits, and then followed him for two days to keep tabs on whom he was trying to meet.

¶5. (C) Brahim blamed the government for inflaming, and in some cases provoking, the protests that took place in Gafsa and Redeyef from January through June. He stated that while in the southwest, he saw nearly 200 policemen provoking the assembled crowd and preventing people from taking photos. Security officials, Brahim opined, have been trying to make Gafsa look violent to justify their retaliation. In addition, he said local officials were forcing the families of those arrested during the protests to visit their family members on different days. The prison is located outside of town, and this policy prevents the families from traveling together and defraying some of the costs of travel. Though attributing blame to government officials, Brahim said he was unsure as to the extent to which President Ben Ali is aware of the events in Gafsa and the current conditions there.

Real Elections, Just Once

¶6. (C) The at-Tajdid party members reserved their most pointed criticism for the electoral process. Brahim bluntly stated, "It's the regime that decides votes...we have three members in parliament because that's what we were given." He added that at-Tajdid wanted only the votes they earned, even if that meant winning less than one percent. He wistfully stated that he hoped Tunisia would know real elections at least once. For example, in 1998 Brahim said the ballot boxes were emptied in front of at-Tajdid party officials and replaced with votes for the RCD. When the party publicly complained, mosques across the country delivered sermons against the party for three weeks. (Note: The GOT writes the Friday sermons for all mosques in Tunisia and places police inside the mosques to ensure the sermons are delivered as written.) In 2004, after at-Tajdid objected to RCD efforts to censor their comments, the party was given only five minutes of media airtime, and it was scheduled during the middle of Friday afternoon prayers to ensure a small audience.

¶7. (C) According to Brahim, voter apathy has become a major problem after the 2004 elections made it clear that the voters were not the ones deciding the outcome of elections. At-Tajdid has yet to officially decide whether or not Brahim will run for president in 2009, although he does have the right. At the moment, Brahim explained, at-Tajdid's primary objective is pushing for credible elections instead of playing a prescribed role in a predetermined play. Brahim acknowledged that this strategy could carry some risk, as government officials have been known to harass activists, in one case insinuating that "a car accident might happen."

¶8. (C) Despite the potential consequences, Brahim said that his party voted against amending the constitution's provisions on criteria for presidential candidates because the GOT practically selected which candidates it wanted to run and then wrote the law (the measure passed 184 to 5). He opined that the political situation is more closed now than it was in 2004 and quipped that an open country like Tunisia

does not need such a closed government. Chaouch, Brahim, and El Messaoudi proposed a number of electoral reforms. For example, they called for currently unrecognized parties to be registered. In addition, they proposed simplified, perhaps automatic, voter registration to avoid names mysteriously disappearing from the voter registration list.

USG on the Right Track

¶9. (C) Brahim remarked that at-Tajdid took special note of the remarks Secretary Rice made to the press about the need for reform following her visit to Tunisia, and he felt that the USG was taking the right approach. While Tunisians can tackle reform efforts themselves, he said there is a wish for other countries to understand and acknowledge local conditions. The party officials also concurred with the USG's proposed two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Ambassador reiterated the USG's commitment to the Middle East peace process, and offered Embassy assistance in including at-Tajdid members on exchange programs and Embassy-sponsored programs.

Comment

¶10. (C) The fact that opposition parties represented in Parliament are willing to push for reform is an encouraging development. Tunisia's best hope for increased freedom of expression is for reformers inside and outside the government to push for change. How far at-Tajdid will be allowed to push the envelope remains to be seen, but the Embassy will do what it can to support the party's efforts. For example, we have suggested to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) that members of at-Tajdid be included in a delegation from Tunisia to be sent to the United States to observe the November presidential elections. End Comment.

GODEC